



Involving Families in School Events

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For successful family programs at school, focus on climate, collaboration, and communication.

Early in the year, Mrs. Gonzalez and her colleagues began planning for the annual fall fund-raising dance. Parent representatives, members of the student council, and a representative from the school's corporate sponsor attended the initial meeting. From previous experience with successful school events, the teachers recognized that family involvement in the planning process is critical to reaching diverse communities.

Parents in diverse families, including those that may have immigrated recently, may be unfamiliar with school

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functions and often are especially concerned about them. By communicating details surrounding the dance, the principal can allay many concerns. Regarding the dance, for example, parents want to know that their children will be safe at school after hours, who will be chaperoning the activity, and whether the DJ will be playing appropriate music. They also might be concerned about whether students will have freedom to enter and exit the building, and whether children from other schools in the district will be attending.

Everyone benefits when parent and family involvement occurs in educational settings (Epstein 1987; Barrera 2002). Parents want to know what is happening in the school environment; administrators want to keep teachers and parents as happy as possible; and teachers are aware that having parents on their side improves student behavior and achievement. Whether a program is at the preschool, elementary, or high school level, parent involvement enhances education for students, parents, teachers, and schools (Chen 2001).

Three components are essential to successful programs that involve families in an educational setting: climate, collaboration, and communication (Henderson 1987; Barrera 2002). These constructs set a strong foundation for educators to plan and facilitate any school event and achieve desired outcomes for all involved. Regardless of significant student population growth, increased ethnic diversity, and escalating poverty, educators in public schools can employ the strategies presented here to invite positive parent involvement.

Climate

Parents who face major problems, such as their own unemployment, homelessness, or lack of support from other adults, are not likely to be able to meet their children's needs (Epstein 1987). Diverse parents' needs may be so great that they overshadow the children's needs. Recognizing difficult circumstances, educators can begin to focus on the needs of diverse families—parents and their children—and work to establish a climate of trust and cooperation.

Effective parent involvement programs match the needs of school and community in creating a positive school climate. Some parents are able to help and support schools and children's learning in many ways: as volunteer tutors; as field-trip supervisors; as classroom assistants and curriculum resources; as lunchroom, nurse's office, and administrative office assistants; as organizers of school events and assemblies; and by attending student performances, sporting events, and other school-related activities.

Other parents may need a great deal of assistance, and the school may be able to provide support for these families. Schools have an opportunity to help students and their families by forming collaborative relationships with public and private agencies that provide family support services. These relationships may include partnerships with public health and human services agencies, local businesses, higher education systems, youth-serving organizations, and religious, civic, and other community-based organizations.

Parents can participate in programs to foster the development of their own knowledge and skills. Learning activities for parents may include literacy instruction, basic adult education, job training, continuing education, child development instruction, and parenting education. Schools can offer the use of facilities and other resources to encourage teachers and other personnel to learn about cultural and community values and practices that are common to their students and their families. See Table I for other examples of school-climate strategies.

Table 1. School Climate Strategies

Strategy	Examples
Define the teacher's role for parents.	Plan a parent focus group to generate input and knowledge about their interpretation of the teacher's role.
Demonstrate sensitivity to family values, cultural differences, and characteristics.	Send out a family survey to learn about parents' origins and school experiences.
Encourage achievement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call families the night before the state-mandated end-of-grade achievement test to encourage children's best performance. • Allow children to be "Principal of the Day" if a certain level of performance is achieved.

Parents should be encouraged to support their children's education through home-learning activities. These activities include ensuring that children's health and environmental conditions are conducive to learning. Parents can supervise children's homework and model support for education through their own continuing education activities. Educators can play an important role in teaching parents about the school's expectations for student learning, including curriculum options, graduation requirements, and school and community-based services that support student growth and learning (Connors and Epstein 1995).

Communication

Communication between home and school is the foundation of a solid partnership. When parents and educators communicate effectively, positive relationships develop, problems are solved more easily, and students make greater progress (Comer and Haynes 1991). Often parent-teacher conferences can be one-way communications when the goal is merely reporting student progress. Effective home-school communication is characterized by two-way sharing of information vital to student success. This communication needs to be regular and meaningful, with sharing coming from both parents and schools.

Parents and schools should communicate with one another about school activities and programs,

discipline codes, learning objectives, and children's state of knowledge. This sharing of information can be accomplished through newsletters, school handbooks, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, informal messages, and telephone calls. Schools can work through community-based organizations to develop relationships with parents from diverse backgrounds and others who previously have not been involved actively in school-parent activities.

Schools should establish programs, such as the following, to encourage close communication and strong parental involvement at a school-wide level.

- School newsletters created by students, teachers, and parents, with multiple languages represented
- School-community projects with staff facilitating endeavors
- Parent awareness workshops in the languages of the community
- School policy that includes parental input
- A variety of resources that parents and volunteers can use
- Adult basic education
- Technology training

Adjusting programs to the specific needs of families is key to positive family-school cooperation. Schools should be sensitive to the realities faced by diverse families. There is no "one-size-fits-all" parent program, and schools must modify communications to meet the needs of families. Educators also should be aware that what works well in one school may not work in another. Effective parent communication needs to respond to the cultural traits and values of ethnic populations. For examples of effective parental communications, see Table 2.

Collaboration

Schools can reach out to link families to needed services and community organizations, which in turn can strengthen home environments and increase student learning. Communications with businesses, cultural organizations, and community groups create shared responsibility for the well-being of children, families, and schools by all members of the community (Antunez 2000). As members of advisory councils, PTAs, or other groups, parents can advocate for change, help develop school-improvement plans, and participate in school governance.

All of these groups can lead the community in assessing school needs and developing goals, especially when parents are included in the discussion. The best parent-involvement programs allow plenty of time for open-ended, parent-dominated discussions that foster positive school climate and communication. Public school educators should encourage family involvement in policy making.

Educators in diverse schools always should make parents feel welcome. For bilingual parents to feel appreciated and comfortable, volunteer work must be meaningful and valuable to them. Capitalizing on the expertise and skills of parents provides much needed support to educators and administrators already taxed in their attempts to meet academic goals and student needs. Though there are many parents for whom volunteering during school hours is not possible, creative solutions like before- or after-school "drop-in" programs or "in-home" support activities provide opportunities for parents to offer their assistance as well.

Recognizing diverse family structures, circumstances, and responsibilities—including differences that might

Table 2. Parental Communication Strategies

Strategy	Examples
Respect parents' work schedules.	Find out where parents work and develop conference or workshop sessions at times that are convenient for them.
Understand families' busy lives.	Introduce electronic systems that families can use to learn what their children are doing in their classrooms (telephone systems or e-mail).
Encourage parents to communicate.	Allow parents to use the school's computer services to dialogue with teachers, children, other parents, and family members in other countries.
Recognize miscommunications in second languages.	Consider that miscommunications will occur and use them to strengthen relationships with diverse families.
Allow children to enhance communication processes.	Give children opportunities to do their own artwork on parent notices, newsletters, and other correspondence to attract parents' attention.

impede parent participation—is an important ingredient in the three constructs of climate, communication, and collaboration. Because the persons responsible for a child may not be the child’s biological parents, policies and programs should include participation by all persons interested in the child’s educational progress. See Table 3 for school activities that modify or complement the needs of the learning community.

Table 3. Collaboration Strategies

Strategy	Examples
Have parents help when teachers are absent.	Ask parents to serve as classroom ambassadors when teachers are absent.
Involve parents in reading and writing activities.	Use a workshop session to model reading strategies to parents.
Utilize school technology.	Provide technology classes for parents’ basic computer needs.
Involve fathers in school activities.	Invite fathers to a day at school with their children. Use a written invitation letter that fathers can show to their employers.
Ensure commitment among parents, teachers, and students.	Develop contractual agreements that support responsibility, positive work habits, and knowledge acquisition in specific content areas.

Other Strategies

In some instances, strategies are difficult to delineate by construct. In Table 4, other strategies are described in relation to one or more of the three constructs, which sometime overlap. School improvement occurs with a preponderance of strategies, not just the application of one or two in response to isolated parent criticism.

Closing Thoughts

The relationship of schools to diverse communities demands attention by administrators, teachers, staff members, and volunteers. How well the three constructs mesh depends on the abilities and sensitivities of all constituencies involved. The activities suggested here are representative of possible strategies for reaching families in diverse communities. When schools reach out to families, they may discover that the three constructs have varying levels of interdependency. Each school must develop its own unique avenue to address families’ needs successfully. ■

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Table 4. Other Strategies

Constructs	Strategy	Examples
Climate Collaboration	Acknowledge parent accountability.	Place parent sign-in sheets in the school office for parent volunteers and tutors to sign when they work in the school. Give them a certificate of appreciation at the end of the school year.
Climate Communication	Understand various parent-staff relationships.	Use role-playing activities during workshops or focus groups to demonstrate relationship dos and don’ts.
Communication Collaboration	Assist with classroom management.	Invite parents to help with a time-out area of the room so they can listen to and observe the children.
Communication Collaboration	Understand curriculum.	Send home calendars showing knowledge and skills being introduced during the month.
Climate Communication Collaboration	Invite parent participation.	Invite parent volunteers to complete a specific task for the school (such as painting the parent workroom).